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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000517

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PREL SY

SUBJECT: SEIDNAYA CONTINUES TO STIR FEARS AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

REF: DAMASCUS 482

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (a,b)

¶11. (C) Summary: Amid a wide range of sometimes contradictory reports, a growing number of Embassy sources have indicated the Seidnaya prison riots continue, despite the official government statement to the contrary. Human rights activists have conveyed deep concerns about reports of the alleged violence, and some Syrians are accusing the government security services of cracking down on Islamists and other dissident groups in the prison. We have no evidence of non-violent, established opposition figures being caught up in the riots, which involved Islamists and Kurds, including other mainly Arabs (Jordanians). Continued media silence and the SARG's closure of the area around the prison have exacerbated concerns, especially as President Asad basks in the glow of the European Mediterranean Summit in Paris. End Summary.

Army Source Provides Additional Information

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¶12. (C) An Army doctor told our political FSN on July 15 that the hostage crisis and violence continues at Seidnaya. Affirming what we reported earlier (reftel), this source said inmates had executed a well-planned and organized assault on a large group of Military Police trainees who were conducting a sweep on July 5. After mediation efforts failed, Syrian Military Intelligence (SMI) ordered a large-scale assault on the prisoners, killing between 25-50 and injuring 108. The doctor said he was still seeing new arrivals in nearby Tishreen Hospital, and that some patients had been transferred to hospitals in Damascus. (Note Following the Seidnaya riots Tishreen hospital was closed to the public with a defensive military perimeter 1km around the hospital. One contact reported that as of July 15 the hospital was reopened to the public.) Prior to the President's July 11 departure to Paris, Asad advised that there be no more military assaults in the prison. Several efforts to mediate a resolution have yielded some progress, but hostages remain. Many in the military hierarchy, including SMI Chief Asef Shawkat are reportedly trying to avoid blame.

Kuftaro Expresses Fears of a New Crackdown Against Sunnis

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¶13. (C) Sheikh Saleh Kuftaro (protect), a well-connected Sunni Muslim and son of the former Grand Mufti of Syria, gave us many of the same and some new details on the series of events that occurred at the prison:

- Approximately 100 people were killed in the riots including political inmates, army deserters, and prison guards.

- Military Police at the Seidnaya facilities were unarmed, which led some in the Sunni community to allege that an outside party smuggled weapons into the prison to facilitate the riots. Kuftaro suggested that Shawkat may have been involved to "get Bashar's hands dipped in blood," handling the violence in the same manner as Bashar's uncle, Rifaat Asad did during the suppression of the Palmyra prison riots in the 1980's.

-On Monday July 7, Islamist MP Mohammed Habash and another cleric attempted to mediate, but the prisoners refused to meet.

-Three days after the start of the uprising, President Asad gave strict instructions to stop the riots, and said that the issue should be treated peacefully regardless of how long it would take.

¶4. (C) Kuftaro confirmed that the majority of the Seidnaya prison population are Kurdish people who have not stood trial, suspected Syrian Islamists, Jordanian Islamists, and Maghreb Islamist nationals (around 20-25 people). According to Kuftaro, the aforementioned prisoners led the riots, and a Jordanian Islamist served as a negotiator on behalf of the prisoners to the military. The primary demands of the prisoners are to receive a fair trial, have lawyers representing them, and to not suffer retaliatory punishment for participation in the riots.

¶5. (C) Kuftaro cautioned that young Syrians suspected as extreme Islamists "come in (to prison) as lambs and come out

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stubborn donkeys" and become more radicalized due to their treatment and association with hardened Islamists and criminals. To combat further radicalization of prison inmates, Kuftaro said that he advised the security services to counsel Islamist inmates by conducting dialogues and turning them into moderate Islamists. Kuftaro said that of 4,000 Islamist inmates, 3,500 would accept guidance and could be accepted back into the community, if the SARG were willing to allow moderates (such as Kuftaro) to help "reintegrate" them back into society.

"Guantanamo is a paradise compared to Seidnaya"

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¶6. (C) Fawaz Tello (strictly protect) a long-time human rights and civil society contact, reported that Muslims were "seething" over the treatment of Islamist prisoners in Seidnaya. They blame SARG's perceived incompetence and corruption as the main cause of the violence. He discussed prison conditions and the possibility that the Seidnaya riots began when Islamist prisoners responded to prison guards defiling the Koran. (Comment: Other sources, such as the Army doctor dismissed reports of defiling the Koran.) Tello said the crackdown hearkened back to SARG operations against Islamists and alleged members of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 70s and 80s. Tello said conditions in Siednaya were awful and commented that "Guantanamo is a paradise compared to the maximum security parts of Seidnaya."

¶7. (C) Tello argued that Seidnaya offered Bashar an opportunity to change the portfolio of Bashar's brother-in-law Asef Shawkat, who was in charge of the SARG response to the uprising. He reported that many families with relatives in prison were openly criticizing the regime. He recounted one anecdote of a family bringing their son to Tishreen hospital to take SARG hostages as a way to ensure their son inside Seidnaya was not killed.

Press Blackout Continues

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¶18. (C) None of the Syrian or Syria-based regional press is covering the Seidnaya story. Two other human rights contacts say they have been threatened by state security services with prison and or torture for speaking publicly about Seidnaya to the media or other organizations outside of Syria.

Focus on Human Rights Diminishing

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¶19. (C) Many of our contacts in the human rights community are seeking a response by the international community through prominent NGOs or foreign government's in condemnation of the events of Seidnaya and calling for an international investigation of the incident.

¶10. (C) Contacts in both the human rights and Muslim community expressed great concern over the lack of dialogue on human rights issues between Asad and Sarkozy during the Mediterranean Summit. One contact posited the contrast between the new perception of Syria highlighted by Bashar's series of state visits culminating in his presence at the July 12-13 Mediterranean Summit in Paris and the domestic human rights situation and the violence in Seidnaya.

¶10. (C) Comment: On balance, the SARG's inability to regain control over the Seidnaya prison reveals cracks within the security service and has tarnished Bashar's image locally. Even as the Syrian President returned July 15 from a PR triumph in Paris, many Syrians were grumbling either about the SARG's incompetence in managing the Seidnaya uprising or the SARG's cruel mistreatment of inmates. While Bashar will survive, heads will likely roll after the public's attention has shifted. End Comment.

CORBIN